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ABSTRACT

Future workers will need to develop global awareness and an understanding of competitive, cultural, and economic factors that influence ways of doing business to work in the international arena. Vocational education, the educational program area specifically designed to prepare students for work, must infuse international concepts into programs so the youth of today are prepared for the global workplace. Ostheimer (1995) offers five suggestions. First, with the growth of multinational corporations and increased trade among nations, workers need to be aware of global conditions, development, and trends. Second, vocational educators must internationalize the curriculum. Third, vocational education needs to adopt instructional practices that incorporate international dimensions. For example, communication curricula could be upgraded to take students beyond awareness of other cultures to competence in intercultural communication. Fourth, increased corporate input is necessary for international business program development. The first-hand knowledge and experiences of corporate representatives working in firms that conduct international business offer a current and practical basis for upgrading curricula. Fifth, faculty development is crucial to the implementation of programs that have an international component. (Contains 15 references.) (YLB)

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Adding International Perspectives to Vocational Education

by Bettina Lankard Brown

International work opportunities are increasing as the borders of the U.S. economy expand to embrace international markets. Future workers will need to develop global awareness and an understanding of competitive, cultural, and economic factors that influence ways of doing business in order to work in the international arena. This *Digest* examines the instructional approaches and strategies used in vocational education to prepare students to work in a global environment.

The Industrial Age expanded the vision of U.S. workers beyond their local communities to the country's national borders. The current Information Age moves the focus to global boundaries. To meet the competitive challenges of a global economy, businesses are looking for workers who have cross-cultural knowledge; intercultural communication skills, and an awareness of the political, geographical, and technological conditions that influence work in other countries. (Hart et al. 1994; Philpott 1994). In a survey to elicit chief executive officers' expectations of collegiate international business preparation, "84% of the chief executive officers indicated that 'global awareness' is a key ingredient of international business expertise" (Hart et al. 1994, p. 104).

The preparation of individuals for work in a global economy is a challenge to educational institutions. Considering the limited international experience of most students, the challenge is formidable. Smith and Steward (1995) contrast the cross-cultural education experiences of U.S. students to those of students from other countries. They note that "currently there are 240,000 Asians studying in the U.S. and less than 5,000 U. S. students studying in Asia" (p. 25). In a society characterized by cultural diversity, limited experience with people from other cultures places Americans at a disadvantage in achieving international understanding and social awareness. How can vocational education, the educational program area that is specifically designed to prepare students for work, infuse international concepts into vocational education programs so that the youth of today are prepared for the global workplace? Ostheimer (1995) offers several suggestions:

1. Promote global awareness.
2. Internationalize the curriculum.
3. Adopt instructional practices that incorporate international dimensions.
4. Provide resources that address international/global dimensions of business.
5. Provide faculty development programs in international business.

Global Awareness

With the growth of multinational corporations and increased trade among nations, workers need to understand global conditions, development, and trends. Such issues as population growth, wealth distribution, environmental concerns, diseases, and political and social problems as well as cultural issues such as religious beliefs, customs, and family structure have implications for a country's business activity and practices. The study of such issues will enhance students' abilities to engage in job-related problem solving and decision making in ways that reflect knowledge of and respect for other cultures (McLaughlin 1996).

Classroom study, even when it includes international content, cannot provide the extent of global awareness that one can achieve through international experiences. In a study of chief executive officers, 53.8% of the respondents stressed the importance of foreign exchange and internship programs in preparing workers for international business positions. Experience, travel, and overseas assignments were also listed as important considerations (Hart et al. 1994).

International Curriculum

The literature describes a number of examples vocational educators can draw upon as guides to internationalizing the curriculum. Many of them involve students in studying and comparing U.S. systems with those of other countries, e.g., agriculture, transportation, and family living. A multicultural vocational education program in Omaha, Nebraska, for example, incorporates lesson plans dealing with such topics as "housing around the world, regional cuisines, world hunger, clothing in other cultures, and birth customs of different cultures" (Dovel 1991, p. 24). Ball State University offered seminars on the study of transportation in other countries. The seminars "caused students to understand the development of foreign transportation systems as well as examine the peoples' relationship with those systems. The information about each culture was supplemented with pictures of the people, their homes and cities" (McLaughlin 1996, p. 18).

Ibezim and McCracken (1994) stress the importance of internationalizing the curriculum, with specific reference to agricultural education: "It has become clear that for a student to be considered educated in agriculture, he or she must be cognizant of the interrelationships of various agricultural systems and the governments, cultures, and societies in which they function. It is no longer sufficient to know how to produce food and fiber" (p. 10). In a study of the internationalization of a secondary-level agricultural program—a study that involved agricultural teachers in 12 states of the North Central Region—"the most integrated dimensions were origin of crops, agricultural technology, agricultural trade, geographical factors, economic factors, and political factors" (p. 46).

Instructional Practices

Improving intercultural communication is one way to help students overcome the parochialism that comes from cultural isolation in that it affords a means of connecting students of different nationalities and backgrounds. Smith and Steward (1995) offer the following suggestions for upgrading communication curricula to take students beyond *awareness* of other cultures to *competence* in intercultural communication (pp. 26-27):

- Provide a cognitive instructional framework from which students can develop communication strategies related to elements of (1) oral and written intercultural communication, including negotiations; (2) techniques to overcome language barriers, both oral and written; and (3) advantages and disadvantages of using interpreters.
- Lead students to examine the emotional (or affective) aspects of intercultural communication, e.g., sensitivity to intercultural differences and different value systems, the impact of culture on personal attitudes, behaviors, and communication; and the distinction between true and false perceptions in reaching a true understanding of a foreign culture's communication process.

- Provide experiences through which students can engage in real-life application of the skills they learn. For example, students should be given opportunities to write letters, memoranda, and reports for intercultural audiences; make presentations using interpreters; use telecommunications technology; engage in simulated intercultural negotiation experiences; and so forth.

The World Wide Web offers another means of broadening students' global horizons. Recent publications on using the Internet for international exposure include those by Molloy (1996), Frazier et al. (1995), and Pachnowski (1996). Molloy (1996) provides a directory of products, services, and other resources pertaining to Latin America that are available on Internet. Frazier et al. (1995) offer guides to becoming informed world citizens and locating maps. Pachnowski (1996) describes the vast amount of data available through Internet and provides an extensive list of educational resources, including American Educational Research Association and International Exchange Classroom Connections mailing lists, the World Wide Web, and addresses for Usenet news groups and gophers.

International Business Programs

One of the insights of the study by Hart et al. (1994) is the perception of business executives that increased corporate input is necessary for international business program development. The first-hand knowledge and experiences of corporate representatives working in firms that conduct international business offer a current and practical basis for upgrading curricula.

Vocational education instructors can expand their repertoire of resources by sharing curriculum materials and designs with instructors around the world. Other strategies and activities may be uncovered by reviewing the experiences of youth and adult leadership organizations, such as Future Farmers of America (Martin 1993). Educational resources can also be located in the ERIC database and on the World Wide Web..

For postsecondary faculty, community and technical colleges could form an international faculty committee to review curriculum, integrate international components, acquire materials, and attend seminars (Delaney 1995). Wismer (1994) recommends that colleges (1) establish a cross-functional task force to develop a comprehensive plan for international education and training; (2) form alliances with government, business, and industry to develop competencies for students and business employees, which also strengthen local economic development; and (3) establish advisory boards from local business and industry to provide valuable input into training programs.

Tech prep programs offer another strategy for infusing international content into vocational programs. Sutliff (1996), who visited London to share tech prep tips, suggests broadening the scope of tech prep to focus on preparing a world-class work force for global competition.

Faculty Development

Faculty development is crucial to the implementation of programs that have an international component. Ibezim and McCracken (1994) suggest that "agricultural teachers who exhibit higher degrees of cultural awareness would be more likely to internationalize their agricultural instruction" (p. 48). This is not surprising as teachers themselves need a base of knowledge and experience in international practices before they can impart their knowledge to students. Because many teachers have had no international education themselves, opportunities like staff development workshops and seminars, externships in other countries, study tours, continuing education courses in international business, and participation in business associations and organizations that promote international education would add valuable insight into the issues they should be addressing in their instruction and classroom curriculum.

Conclusion

The global workplace is a reality. Global competition as well as the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) have stimulated the growth of multinational corporations as well as increased trade among nations (McLaughlin 1996, p. 14). The U.S. population will continue to reflect cultural diversity, which requires an awareness, understanding, and joining of people from diverse backgrounds who can work together to accomplish family, community, and economic goals. Vocational education can make a major contribution by adding international perspectives to its vocational education programs.

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